



Origin of the Term “Two Spirit”

By Tom Ebert and Peter Whitcomb

“Two Spirit” is a term chosen to distinctly express Native American/First Nations gender identity and gender variance. Two Spirit indicates an ability to see the world from both male and female perspectives and to bridge the work of male and female. Prior to European colonization, Native people with multiple gender and sexual identities - who today might be called lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender - were not only accepted, but honored and respected among their Native community. Tribal Elders tell of people who were gifted among all beings because they carried two spirits, that of male and female. Two-Spirited individuals traditionally held special roles within the Native American communities, culture, and ceremonial life. They were often the visionaries, healers, medicine people, and caregivers of their communities and tribes. This type of cross-gender identity has been documented in 155 tribes across Native North America. Not all tribes/nations have rigid gender roles, but, among those that do, some consider there to be at least four genders: feminine woman, masculine woman, feminine man, masculine man. Another example is *nadleeh*—in the Navajo language which means, “the changing one,” a person whose gender identity exists beyond male or female.

We'wha (1849–1896, various spellings) pictured, was a Zuni Native American from New Mexico.

We'wha was an accomplished potter and weaver, and a recognized expert in Zuni religion. That such an individual could become a representative for his tribe underscores the degree to which individual differences in gender and sexuality were accepted. In most tribes the ability to combine male and female skills was not viewed as a liability but a talent. It came as no surprise to the Zunis that We'wha would travel thousands of miles, overcoming the obstacles of language and culture, to live and mingle with the leaders of a powerful nation. Berdaches were expected to be extraordinary.

In an Historical account by Don Pedro Fages was third in command of a 1769-70 Spanish exploration of what is now California “I have submitted substantial evidence that those Indian men who, both here and farther inland, are observed in the dress, clothing and character of women - there being two or three such in each village They are called *joyas*, and are held in great esteem.”